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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANJUL 000249

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DAKAR PASS RAO, DAO, AND ODC

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/21/2016
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINS](#) [CASC](#) [ASEC](#) [PHUM](#) [KMCA](#) [GA](#) [SG](#)
SUBJECT: THE GAMBIA: MORE DETAINEES RELEASED, OTHER
DEVELOPMENTS

REF: A. BANJUL 233
[B](#). BANJUL 225
[C](#). BANJUL 222

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Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOSEPH STAFFORD, REASON 1.4 (B AND D)

SUMMARY

1. (C) The General Manager and Editor-in-Chief of the journal, "Independent," are among detainees released April 20 and ostensibly cleared of involvement in the aborted coup plot March 21. Ambassador met April 21 with Interior Minister Jatta and pressed again for access to Amcit detainee and for respect of detainee' rights; Jatta made no commitment. The European Union and local Bar Association issued statements expressing concern over detention of plot-related suspects without charge beyond the 72-hour maximum period stipulated by law. Two knowledgeable sources said they could not rule out another attempt at a "palace coup." Ambassador will meet April 24 with Foreign Affairs Permanent Secretary and press for access to Amcit detainee. END SUMMARY.

MORE DETAINEES RELEASED

2. (SBU) Following authorities' April 15 release of former National Assembly Speaker Sheriff Dibba (ref a), another seven detainees picked up for suspected involvement in the aborted coup plot March 21 were released on April 20. Corroborating media reports, our sources confirm that the seven were all civilians and that among them were General Manager Madi Ceesay and Editor-in-Chief Musa Saidykhan of the journal "Independent," closed by authorities March 27. We are told that all seven were released without charge, but that they had been held beyond the 72-hour period within which, by law, detainees must be charged. As for the estimated 18 remaining detainees, among them are "Independent" journalist Lamin Fatty and former senior official with the National Intelligence Agency (NIA) Keemo Balajo, picked up again after being released April 15. (COMMENT: Authorities' picking up Balajo again so soon after his release highlights, per ref b, the disarray besetting the NIA following the foiled coup plot. END COMMENT)

MEETING WITH INTERIOR MINISTER

3. (C) Ambassador met April 21 with Interior Minister Baboucar Jatta and repeated his previous requests (ref c) for

prompt access to detained Amcit (dual U.S.-Gambian national) Tamsir Jasseh, expressing our deep concern over the delay in GOTG's granting access. Ambassador also conveyed deep concern over ongoing reports of torture of detainees. (NOTE: Well-informed media source claimed that among those released April 21, former Mayor of Banjul suburb of Kanifing, Lai Conteh, showed clear signs of having been severely beaten. END NOTE) Pressed by Ambassador, Interior Minister Jatta declined to say when access to Jasseh might be granted. As for reported torture incidents, he acknowledged that some detainees "might have been roughed up" for refusing to provide information under questioning. Ambassador urged Jatta to ensure proper treatment of detainees and bring to account those responsible for abuses; Jatta took this on board, but made no response.

STATEMENT BY EU, BAR ASSOCIATION

¶4. (U) British Charge provided copy of recent statement by European Union "strongly condemning" the failed overthrow plot and "welcoming" the Gambian public's "calm and restrained" response (full text being sent to AF/W). However, the EU went on to express concern over the holding of detainees without charge beyond the 72-hour period and over closure of the "Independent." The Gambia's Bar Association, in an April 20 statement, also noted the excessive detention periods and called on the GOTG to "adhere to the rule of law in all stages of the arrest, detention, and trial of coup suspects."

ANOTHER POSSIBLE COUP ATTEMPT?

¶5. (C) In recent conversations with us, two knowledgeable sources said they could not rule out the possibility of another attempt to overthrow President Jammeh. One source, a

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former GOTG Minister, said that he had been aware, prior to the March 21 incident, of another group opposed to Jammeh that had spoken to him of planning to oust him. This source declined to identify members of this group and professed ignorance of precise details of their possible scheme, but surmised that they had not been dissuaded from going forward due to the thwarting of the plot March 21. Both sources asserted that a follow-up overthrow attempt would likely be a "palace coup" that would not disturb the country's underlying stability in any significant way.

COMMENT

¶6. (C) Ambassador is scheduled to meet April 24 with Foreign Affairs Permanent Secretary William Joof and will press again for access to Amcit Jasseh and for respect for detainees' rights. We sense growing public concern over the GOTG's continued silence over the status of remaining detainees and timetable for trials. The reports of torture are adding to the undercurrent of jitteriness, amidst an otherwise calm, business-as-usual atmosphere. Sources' assertion of another possible coup attempt is ominous, and highlights need for careful monitoring of the internal situation here, one month after the failed overthrow plot. END COMMENT.
STAFFORD